

Are U.S. Schools Filling the Gap With Programs that Promote Weight Stigma?

[Announcer] This program is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[Latoya Simmons] Welcome to this edition of *PCD Sound Bites*. I'm your host, Latoya Simmons. School-based obesity prevention programs can be a key public health strategy for addressing the childhood obesity epidemic in the United States. But many times, it is unclear how broadly evidence-based obesity prevention programs are being used in schools, and whether the absence of effective, evidence-based programs can be harmful to students. Today, I'm speaking by phone with Dr. Erica Kenney, a research fellow at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. She is an author of a recent study evaluating how frequently U.S. schools use evidence-based obesity prevention programs and assessing the frequency in which schools implement programs that may unintentionally worsen weight stigma among students. Thank you for joining me, Erica.

[Erica Kenney] Thanks for having me today.

[Latoya Simmons] Erica, give us a brief overview of your study.

[Erica Kenney] Sure. This study was building actually off of an earlier set of studies that my colleagues and I had done to examine how frequently students might experience weight bias in school settings, because we feel that's an important dynamic of the obesity epidemic, and an important thing to consider with obesity prevention. So, in a qualitative study that my colleagues and I had done with interviewing teachers about weight bias in school settings, several teachers actually had told us that they had Biggest Loser-style contests in their schools for students to compete to lose the most weight. And we found this to be pretty surprising and a little bit concerning, and you know, we knew that the schools were doing this with the best of intentions, trying to, you know, think, well we've got to address the obesity epidemic, we have to help kids lose weight, but without the, you know, help from sound evidence, sound science, they had come up with these kind of stigmatizing programs that were actually emphasizing weight loss at all costs, they weren't emphasizing healthy behaviors. So, this was very concerning, so we wanted to sort of do a more rigorous quantitative survey to see how frequently these kinds of programs were actually being used, nationally. So, I collaborated with my colleague, Suzanne Wintner, who is an expert on school climate. And she and I developed a survey to ask schools about what types of wellness and obesity prevention programs they use, and we fielded it among a random sample of public school administrators, nationwide, and we ended up with 247 responses. So, we wanted to see how frequently these stigmatizing programs are used, and conversely, how frequently the evidence-based programs that public health researchers work so hard on are actually used, instead.

[Latoya Simmons] What did you find when assessing the use of pre-developed obesity prevention programs?

[Erica Kenney] We found that it was really rare. So, even though a little less than half of the schools said they used some type of wellness programming or nutrition or physical activity or obesity prevention, only 17 out of the 247 schools said they used even a pre-developed program, never mind evidence-based. So that's only about seven percent; that's really small. And then, only seven schools out of the 247 said that they used a program that actually had evidence for effectiveness. So, this is a program that's then had a formal research evaluation done of the program's effect. That's less than three percent of the schools. So, while some schools are trying to implement some types of programming to help students maintain healthy nutrition or physical activity behaviors, very, very few are utilizing the effective, evidence-based programs that already exist out there.

[Latoya Simmons] Why could ad-hoc programs be detrimental to students?

[Erica Kenney] Well, there's a pretty strong evidence base that shows that when we develop interventions that focus on promoting healthy eating, physical activity, and reduced screen time for everyone, rather than focusing just on losing weight, per se, or singling out students with obesity, these interventions that focus on healthy behaviors tend to be the most effective for helping students achieve a healthier weight. The students get the message that their health is the important thing, not a number on a scale. And what's great about this is that it results in healthier weight for everyone and it also results in less disordered weight control behaviors, which is another concern. On the flip side, if programs focus solely on weight, that sends the message to students that their weight is the most important thing, not their health. And what can happen is, this can trigger disordered weight control behaviors and it can exacerbate weight stigma. And we know that experiencing weight stigma is really counterproductive, as it can lead to a higher risk of binge eating and it can actually lead to increased BMI over time. So, we want to focus on these kind of evidence-based programs that don't focus solely on weight, such as Planet Health or GEMS, which have shown that they reduce obesity and they reduce disordered weight control. If those kinds of programs are not implemented, we run the risk of having programs in place that either just aren't very effective, which is just kind of a waste of school's resources, or you might be putting programs in place that, again, are done with the best of intentions, but end up actually exacerbating weight bias.

[Latoya Simmons] Erica, your study found that less than three percent of schools had implemented any type of obesity prevention program. Why do you think schools are struggling in this area?

[Erica Kenney] I think that's a great question, and I think that that's something that particularly folks who are focusing on dissemination and implementation issues are gonna be focusing on. But, in the meantime, you know, we asked the people who responded to our survey what were some of the key issues, whether they were barriers or supports, to having this type of programming at their school. And what we found was that schools that had implemented any kind of program at all, told us that having enough funding and having access to training opportunities really came up as key issues. A lot of folks who responded that they did have a program noted that they had adequate funding and that they had great training opportunities. And a lot of folks who didn't have programs said, we would like to have done something like this, but we don't have any resources to do it. With regard to specifically implementing those evidence-

based programs, it appears that just many schools are not getting the information about them; they just don't know that they exist. And, you know, school folks don't really have the time or the knowhow to find them on their own, and nor should they really. That's kind of our job in public health is to get these programs out to these folks. There are really few channels for disseminating the information about evidence-based programs directly to schools, and that, I think, needs to change. You know, we can't be expecting school teachers to be looking up stuff on PubMed to see whether they can find an effective obesity prevention program.

[Latoya Simmons] What do you think is the key to helping schools and school administrators use and develop effective obesity prevention programs?

[Erica Kenney] I think that perhaps facilitating stronger partnerships between schools and public health departments could be helpful, so that schools could have access to public health practitioners' expertise, rather than the burden being on them to figure this all out on their own. It does seem that, you know, in areas where there *is* a partnership between schools and public health departments, they're able to actually get the information about something like Planet Health or Catch or Spark out to schools a lot better. And that could really help solve the problem of public health researchers and public health practitioners having all of these resources going into developing these obesity prevention programs and then them not getting out to the schools. So, I think creating some kind of partnership so that there's an avenue and a way for schools and public health practitioners to share with each other and actually get that information out there is gonna be a really crucial component.

[Latoya Simmons] Thank you, Erica. You can read Erica's study online at cdc.gov/pcd.

The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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